NOVA SCOTIA Government of Nova Scotia

Progress in New School Construction Process

Department of Education and Culture (to July 99)

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A new leasing approach in the works for Amherst Regional High School marks more progress and momentum in the province's school construction process.

Following community consultation, the province will sign its first lease based on a pre-determined, all-inclusive price, covering not only construction, but ongoing operating, maintenance and new technology costs for 20 years.

"We're building experience and gaining momentum. We use everything we learn to keep improving the process, "Education and Culture Minister Robbie Harrison said. "Our goal is to open much-needed schools as quickly as our partners can build them and the Amherst agreement gives us another way to get the job done."

The new leasing approach is outlined in a development agreement between the province and Ashford Investments - the partner working with government, the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board and the community on the new Amherst high school. Based on a set budget, the development agreement requires consultation with teachers, parents, students and community members, so the school reflects local priorities.

The development agreement leads to a "gross" lease, which includes costs of construction, ongoing maintenance, operations, financing and new technology for the 20-year lease term. This transfers additional risk to the private sector partner, and means stable, predictable costs for the school board. To date, the province has signed net leases, covering construction costs, with boards negotiating separate operating agreements. Options to extend the lease, buy the school or walk away exist for both lease types.

"The all-in price is great, particularly for a high school for approximately 1,000 students," said Frank Barteaux, executive director, Nova Scotia School Boards Association. "If the roof leaks, Ashford pays. Technology refreshment, the agreement means Ashford provides this. Air quality problems, again, Ashford gets the bill. This means predictable costs for our school board, keeping more money in the classroom.

With the development agreement now in place, Ashford has set a precise timetable, based on the size of the project, the need for meaningful consultation and realities of winter construction. "We can now move full-steam ahead and set a construction schedule that is realistic and reliable, Ashford president Patrick Gillespie said. "Students will be in the new Amherst High by late 1999, early 2000."

Mr. Gillespie promises the new Amherst High will be a school worth waiting for. "We're building a school and facilities that

will form the heart of the community for at least 20 years," Mr. Gillespie said. "We will be working shoulder-to-shoulder with teachers, parents, students and the community -to do the job right and build them a school that reflects their vision."

Discussions get under way immediately with the school board and others in the community, with the first public meeting scheduled in Amherst for Aug. 3.

The all-inclusive price is set between $2.5 million and $2.75 million annually. Setting a budget in advance controls costs, provides good value for money, and gives the partner, school board and community considerable flexibility and choice in setting priorities for their school, as long as minimum educational and design standards are met.

While supporting this new leasing approach, Mr. Harrison said net leases also have benefits. The Halifax Regional School Board, for example, reached a separate operating agreement it estimates will save about 20 cents per square foot, compared to average costs for other Halifax County schools.

"Each agreement is different, negotiated for different schools at different times, with different partners," said Mr. Harrison. "The process must be flexible enough to allow for these differences, so we can build more schools in more communities, without adding to the provincial debt."

The minister said the process remains on track to have partners for more than 30 other schools by summer's end. "What we've learned from Amherst and other projects, we're using to improve and speed up the process so other schools open as quickly as our partners can build them."

NOTE: The following is intended for use by broadcast media.

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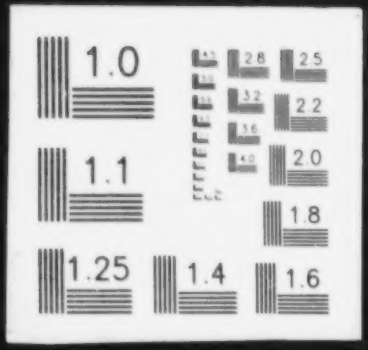
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